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From Shop Floor to Top Floor

An exploratory study of sustainable progression in
the Retail Sector: the case of Morrisons

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FACULTY OF BUSINESS & LAW

Foreword

Amongst the lessons learned from our experiences over the years regarding economic recession and recovery is the importance of the skills agenda. Regardless of political hue, successive governments have made the link between the creation of a skilled workforce and economic growth. Despite their best efforts and a great deal of taxpayers' money, the UK is still less productive than the rest of northern Europe, educational inequality is not diminishing and social mobility has slowed.

Radical thinking about the provision of skills training is long overdue. Businesses need more freedom to set up programmes and more autonomy over what they teach, provided they deliver against agreed standards. Government and business have a shared responsibility to ensure that the UK has the right skills development framework for the future. We also need a much closer connection between qualifications and business requirements if we are to build a skilled workforce to drive economic recovery.

Recognised qualifications do play an important part in setting standards for employers, and to act as a motivation for people who have never achieved educational success or who see it as a stepping stone in their career path. But qualifications have to be connected to the industry's business objectives or they will be of little value. They should also be open to the widest number of employees, regardless of age or educational attainment.

It needs to be easier for employees to get on the skills development ladder, to build experience, confidence and the sense of a real career. Equally it is important for employees to take charge of their own personal development and not just see it as a Company responsibility.

There is a growing understanding that job mobility and career development are key factors which impact upon social mobility outcomes. Within Morrisons we believe that there are living examples of how this can work effectively and how the learning from this can be applied further not just to the benefit of the Company and its staff but to the wider economic horizon too.

In order to understand this more fully and to bring an objective view to this subject we invited Leeds Metropolitan University to undertake an in- house study for us and this is their report. We have also partnered with our trade union colleagues in USDAW as part of this research.

We plan to share the outputs of this and further planned research not only to improve our own business but to inform the skills and social mobility agendas nationally.

Norman Pickavance
Group HR Director
Wm Morrison Supermarkets
July 2010

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Executive Summary

'For young people, unfettered by industrial strife the future appears as bright as their own burning aspirations.....they are bright, ambitious, talented and simply want realistic opportunities to make their own way in the world' (Knowsley Young People's Commission, July 2010, p5)

Introduction

There has been increasing political and media attention given to the issue of social mobility in recent times. The interest has been sparked by research which suggests that social mobility may have stalled or even declined in the UK during the post-war period. Various factors have been identified as inhibiting social mobility including early years experiences in the home and at school, education and health along with area based influences. Employment and labour market experiences are also key factors contributing to social mobility with the importance of 'getting a job' and 'sustainable progression' increasingly recognised as an important means of improving social mobility.

There now appears consensus that occupational mobility and career development is a key factor in overcoming social mobility, and the extent to which organisations develop pathways and support careers is a critical element in pursuing social mobility.

This exploratory study has been commissioned by Morrisons to investigate the factors which impact on progression in the workplace and the effect of these on the social mobility of research participants. The study adopts the framework of 'career development' as a construct to explore sustainable progression, drawing on the employment and labour market experiences of employees at Morrisons who, having started on the 'shop floor' have progressed to senior management levels in the company.

The study is based on their 'life stories' to identify the key factors associated with a successful career at Morrisons.

Key early stage factors affecting social mobility

- All the research participants grew up in what they describe as 'working class' neighbourhoods, often living in rented accommodation.
- The majority of research participants grew up in a relatively stable 'traditional' family structure (two adults and siblings).
- The father was the main bread-winner and the mother predominantly the home-maker (sometimes employed on a part-time basis). The fathers of the research participants were employed in manual or unskilled occupations.
- Research participants stayed at school until they were at least 15 and most left with several O-levels
- The majority of them joined Morrisons before they were twenty-one years old and the majority of these joined straight from school

Many research participants joined Morrisons straight from school and came from relatively disadvantaged areas, with little or no experience of further or higher education. They have gone on to attain status and income levels which put them in the top 10% of earners in the UK and this study seeks to identify the key factors associated with this progression.

The experience gained in their formative years appears to have provided the research participants with a sound foundation for the world of work. All but one reported a strong work ethic often gained from their parents. Several expressed specific career aspirations that included interests in a professional career (such as law, journalism, teaching, aviation or the police). However none of the research

participants were able to pursue their early career aspirations, largely due to a lack of the qualifications required to gain entry to their preferred professions

Key factors influencing progression

During their employment at Morrisons all the research participants have been able to develop an awareness of potential job opportunities and grasp them in order to progress in their careers. They took between five and twelve years to progress to the Store General Manager level and a number have subsequently progressed to regional and Director level positions.

The study suggests that a combination of 'push' (on behalf of the individual) and 'pull' (on behalf of the organisation) factors support the identification of job opportunities and encourage career progression. The influence of these factors often varies throughout an individuals' career with the organisation 'pulling' individuals forward at some times and individuals 'pushing' themselves forward at other times.

Key 'pull' factors influencing progression

- Job opportunities
- Mentors
- Directive coaching
- Training and development courses

Key 'push' factors influencing progression

- Self-efficacy
- Readiness to move on
- In at the deep-end
- Non-work factors

The directive coaching and mentoring provided by peers, line managers and senior managers was identified as a major influence on work performance and career development.

The psychological contract underpinning sustained employment is premised on a reciprocal employer-employee relationship characterised by commitment, loyalty and trust. Individuals who work hard and demonstrate loyalty can anticipate that they will be rewarded with an organisationally managed career which includes support, development, promotion and long-term job security.

The key elements of the psychological contract emerging from the research are:

- Job opportunities and career pathways
- Job satisfaction and financial reward
- Social capital
- Physical mobility
- Achievement

Nature of sustainable progression at Morrisons

The traditional model of career development based on increasing status, responsibility and monetary rewards is evident through the 'life stories' of the Morrisons managers.

The life stories however also echo the characteristics of other careers. The wide-ranging contexts available for store managers to face new challenges and gain new skills through working in different types and size of store, new store openings and special projects are an example of this. The majority of research participants suggested that, in keeping with the incremental approach to career planning they adopted, they would be keen to progress to the 'next step'. Most often this was

related to vertical progression however a couple expressed the wish to work in different divisions to broaden their experience.

The findings emerging from this study reinforce the view that as people's self-efficacy develops, their intention to exert control over career outcomes enables them to exhibit career self-management behaviours which can lead to the achievement of desired career goals and ultimately success. The research participants suggest that rigorous standards in stores provide an important foundation for performance and the development of self-efficacy. As colleagues, they soon set their sights on vertical promotion, achieving initial promotions to Supervisor and Departmental Head relatively rapidly.

Summary and implications for policy

There now appears to be widespread consensus that progression in the labour market is a key factor in addressing social mobility. There remains a need to recognise and understand the situated nature of the Human Resource Development policies and practices adopted by employers and the impact that these can have on progression. The occupational structures and processes, which allow progression from entry-level roles to professional occupations, are a key to unlock the door to a range of opportunities for social mobility. The findings emerging from this research study suggest that employers like Morrisons are providing such structures and, for those contributing to this research, an effective vehicle for progression. In this case sustainable progression appears to be built on largely informal processes aimed at developing self-efficacy and providing 'small steps' progression opportunities. The recent development of an inclusive approach to talent management and more structured training at Morrisons provides an opportunity for employees at all levels of the organisation to learn and progress.

For the research participants who all started out in 'working class' communities and joined Morrisons as young men and women, employment at the company has seen a real and substantial improvement in their financial and social situation. They have been able to start as colleagues on the shop floor and progress in the organisation in careers that (in several cases) span more than 20 years with the company.

The research illustrates the potential of the retail sector for raising skills levels and providing an important contribution to developing human and social capital. The sector also provides employment opportunities for people from a variety of social backgrounds, often including local jobs for people living in disadvantaged communities. Current policy tends to focus on 'knowledge intensive' and 'high skill' industries. Retail is not commonly seen to fit within that category yet it is the UK's largest private sector employer and provides employment for just fewer than three million employees, contributing more than £321bn turnover to the national economy. As this case study demonstrates, employers like Morrisons have a key role to play in providing an important source of employment, progression routes and skills development opportunities and through this can act as a vehicle to facilitate greater social mobility

Future research

This exploratory study suggests many possibilities for future research associated with the role that employers Human Resource Development policies and practices play in helping to establish progression routes and developing processes that support social mobility. For example, the research has highlighted the 'push-pull' dimension of career development at Morrisons and the role that informal HRD processes play in the development of individuals. A study to investigate the factors which influence individuals generally, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds more specifically, to take ownership of their career would be a fruitful line of further enquiry.

This initial study has provided an insight into the individual and organisational factors which impact on the sustained progression of a dozen managers at Morrisons who joined the company at an early age and went on to experience successful careers. A further quantitative study is planned to test the generalisability of the findings of this study. It will investigate the efficacy of the progression routes and support processes in the workplace and the extent to which they provide the structure and opportunity for all employees to achieve career success.

1. Introduction

There has been increasing political and media attention given to the issue of social mobility in recent times. The interest has been sparked by research which suggests that social mobility may have stalled or even declined in the UK during the post-war period. Various factors have been identified as inhibiting social mobility including early years experiences in the home and at school, education and health along with area based influences (Nunn et al 2007). Employment and labour market experiences are also key factors contributing to social mobility with the importance of 'getting a job' and 'sustainable progression' increasingly recognised as an important means of improving social mobility.

There now appears consensus that occupational mobility and career development is a key factor and the extent to which organisations develop pathways and support careers is a critical element in pursuing social mobility.

This exploratory study has been commissioned by Morrisons to investigate the factors which impact on progression in the workplace and the effect of these on the social mobility of research participants.

It adopts the framework of 'career development' as a construct to explore sustainable progression, drawing on the employment and labour market experiences of a dozen (seven male and five female) employees at Morrisons who, having started on the 'shop floor' have progressed to senior management levels in the company. The study is based on the 'life stories' of the managers to identify the key factors associated with a successful career at Morrisons.

Figure 1: Key factors affecting social mobility



2. Key Early Stage Factors Affecting Social Mobility

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that early years' experiences and family backgrounds are important causal influences on career aspirations and social mobility. Family structures and stability in the home environment, the quality of social connections and the availability of financial resources are all identified as factors which play a key role in the future labour market experiences of individuals (e.g. Nunn et al 2007, Portes 1998, Putnam 2000). Educational experiences are also identified as important factors influencing opportunities, with academic success closely associated with success and progression in the labour market (e.g. Blanden et al 2005, 2007).

Characteristics of research participants

- The research participants grew up in what they describe as 'working class' neighbourhoods, often living in rented accommodation.
- The majority of research participants grew up in a relatively stable 'traditional' family structure (two adults and siblings). However several reported critical events (e.g. marriage break-up, bereavement, substantial caring responsibilities). Each research participant reported that they had the depth of family and/or personal resources to be able to adequately cope with these circumstances
- Parents often reflect the gender segregation apparent at the time the research participants grew up, with the father the main breadwinner and the mother predominantly the home-maker (sometimes employed on a part-time basis). The fathers of the research participants were employed in manual or unskilled occupations.

- All had entered school at an appropriate age and had stayed at school until they were at least 15. The majority of research participants valued the social aspects of education and several excelled in the sporting domain and exhibited leadership skills at an early age (e.g. were captain of a school team)

The experience gained in their formative years appears to have provided the research participants with a sound foundation for the world of work. Only one left school with no qualifications and half of them went on to Further and Higher Education. All but one reported a strong work ethic often gained from their parents. Several expressed specific career aspirations that included interests in a professional career (such as law, journalism, teaching, aviation or the police). The security of tenure and high status of these professions often appealed to research participants and was encouraged by their parents. However none of the research participants were able to pursue their early career aspirations, largely due to a lack of the qualifications required to gain entry to their preferred professions.

3. Conceptualising Sustainable Progression

The concept of 'sustainable progression' is open to multiple definition and interpretation. In this study we use the concept of 'a career' to explore the development of individuals at Morrisons. A career may be seen as a succession of related jobs within an organisation arranged in a hierarchy through which people move in a predictable sequence (Wilensky 1960). The traditional career is seen as taking place within the confines of an organisational boundary where career success is evidenced by increasing status, responsibility and monetary rewards (Hind 2005). The psychological contract underpinning the employment relationship is premised on a reciprocal employer-employee relationship that outlines what each should expect to give and receive in the relationship (Kotter 1973). Individuals who work hard and demonstrate loyalty can anticipate that they will be rewarded with an organisationally based career that includes support, development, promotion and long-term job security.

Employability, (a combination of the 'right' skills and positive attitudes toward work) is a key requirement for both organisations competing in a highly competitive environment and for individuals seeking to make successful careers (O'Donoghue and Maguire 2005). Highly employable individuals enable organisations to adapt and innovate and meet fluctuating demands for goods and services. Successful organisations need to create an employability culture that supports personal and professional development, flexibility and job opportunities that develop self-esteem and self-confidence amongst employees. The concept of self-efficacy (an individuals' confidence in performing tasks within a given context at speed and to the required standard) is a fundamental element of success (Bandura 1997; Ballout 2009) particularly in a high performance-working environment such as Morrisons.

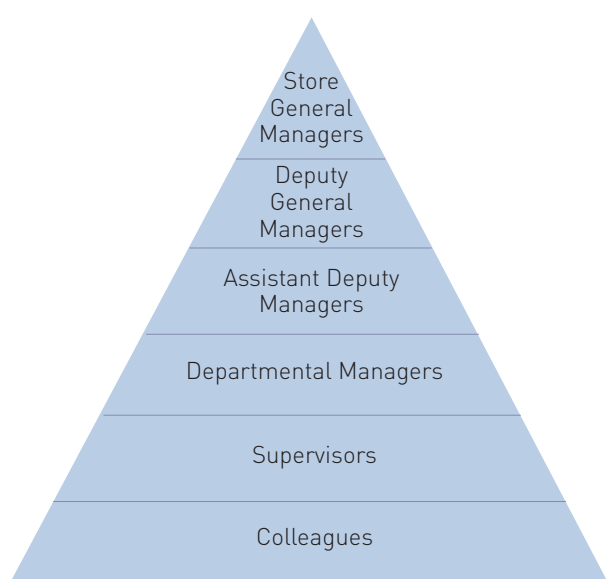
More recently the concept of career has evolved as the economy and labour markets have changed in response to developments in technology, changing production methods, competition and globalisation (Hall 1976, Rousseau 1995). The 'new' model (sometimes known as Protean careers) has shifted thinking away from the traditional career founded on vertical success and employment stability into one which often involves greater job mobility (which may be horizontal in nature) and across organisational boundaries. It represents a 'new' way of thinking where individuals are ultimately responsible for pursuing and managing their self-interested careers. The empirical reality though is that 'new' career forms are less prevalent than sometimes suggested (Briscoe and Finkelstein 2009).

The concept of career commitment would appear to be an important dimension of career development and progression. It often forms a key element of the selection and recruitment criteria used by major employers. Carson and Bedeian (1994) identify three characteristics associated with career commitment – planning, resilience and identity that provide a useful framework for analysis of the life stories.

4. Key Factors Influencing Progression

The findings from the research suggest that the more traditional model of career development would appear to fit with the nature and culture of Morrisons. The progression route within stores in Morrisons is relatively well established and illustrated in the pyramid below (Figure 2):

Figure 2: Progression steps in store

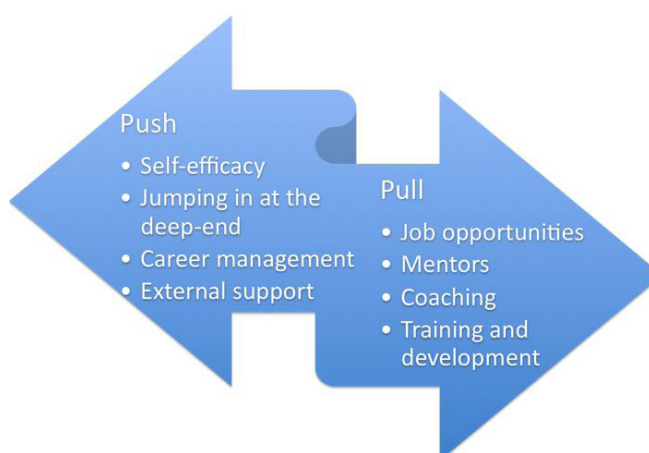


In common with managers in the retail sector more generally (Broadbridge 2007), the vast majority of research participants had entered employment with little intention of making a career at Morrisons or in the sector more generally. The majority of research participants joined Morrisons before they were twenty-one years old and most of these had joined straight from school. Most joined as a colleague on the shop floor and a couple had been taken on as 'management trainees' (starting as colleagues on the shop-floor). The vast majority of these young recruits viewed Morrisons as a 'stop gap' employment opportunity and did not consider it in terms of a starting point for a 'career'. For a couple of research participants who had found school unfulfilling, Morrisons was reported to have had an almost immediate impact on their maturity and commitment.

During their employment at Morrisons all the research participants have been able to develop an awareness of potential job opportunities and grasp them in order to progress in their careers. They took between five and twelve years to progress to the Store General Manager level and a number have subsequently progressed to regional and Director level positions.

The study suggests that a combination of 'push' (on behalf of the individual) and 'pull' (on behalf of the organisation) factors support the identification of job opportunities and encourage career progression. The influence of these factors often varies throughout an individuals' career with the organisation 'pulling' individuals forward at some times and individuals 'pushing' themselves forward at other times. In this way the responsibility for employability (and progression) is shared between the employer and the employee (Waterman et al 1994, O'Donoghue and Maguire 2005). However the life stories tend to suggest that Morrisons has played a major and perhaps dominant role in providing advancement opportunities and selecting 'rising stars' amongst their workforce.

Figure 3: Key factors influencing progression



4.1. Key 'pull' factors influencing progression

Job opportunities - Job rotation in the store plays a key role in the development of people at Morrisons, with employees given considerable opportunities to work in different areas and roles. Several of the research participants reported 'filling in' in positions to cover for absence or leave prior to promotion which had given them valuable insights into what the job required prior to taking on overall responsibility for it. Whilst financial reward for taking on additional responsibility was often (but not universally) important, most research participants cited the satisfaction of a 'job well done' and a strong sense of ownership and commitment as being central to work identity.

Mentors - The research participants provide an insight into the informal processes at play in the development of individual careers. They articulate a process where the organisation, through influential senior managers identifies job opportunities and matches these with individuals assessed as ready for promotion. The selection of suitable candidates for promotion appears to be largely informal in nature with decision-making being based on factors such as performance in the current job and signs of organisational commitment (often a willingness to work long hours).

Directive coaching - on the job and satisfaction associated with completing tasks successfully provided many research participants with the foundation for the continued development of self-efficacy and self-confidence. Research participants

valued the tradition of coaching and 'stretch' established at an early stage by Sir Ken Morrison, as it challenged and stimulated their thinking. Coaching by senior managers appears to be a particular characteristic of Morrisons approach to work performance both in the initial period of employment and in subsequent career development.

Most research participants suggest that managers at Morrisons are demanding but at the same time they are often supportive. One research participant described his experience of working with an inspirational driver of the business as 'painful but enjoyable'. The combination of 'stretch and support' appears to have been effective for both the individual research participants and the organisation.

Training and development courses - The majority of training undertaken in Morrisons relates to operating procedures and regulations. This is recognised to provide clear direction and performance standards to be adhered to by employees and to provide a foundation for high performance. It is recognised by some as a positive characteristic of the Morrisons approach to management as it provides clear guidance and clearly articulates organisational expectations and by others to constrain local autonomy. More recently a number of courses have been introduced to support the development of leadership and management skills that are generally welcomed by research participants. However research participants seldom suggest that courses have played a significant part in the development of their careers.

4.2. Key 'push' factors influencing progression

The development of self efficacy - The emphasis on performance in the job remains a characteristic of employment at Morrisons. This, and the proactive approach of Morrisons, which results in employees being 'pulled' into jobs, has been the foundation for career development for the majority of research participants. They make reference to a range of individual characteristics that have enabled them to cope with the challenge of a job at Morrisons. They often articulate personal traits such as resilience, perseverance, a willingness to learn and take calculated risks and the ability to work in (and lead) a team as key factors in successful progression. The ability to 'roll your sleeves up and get stuck in' was a characteristic of leadership at Morrisons. There is other evidence to suggest that self-efficacy exerts a strong influence on career success and impacts on career commitment (Day and Allen 2004, Kidd and Green 2006).

Readiness to move on - For the majority of the research participants, progression has been largely unplanned and unstructured (personally and by company). Individuals have aimed for and achieved success in their jobs and because of this (and the availability of opportunities) they have been able to progress 'to the next level'.

For the majority of those who were making or had made the progression beyond Store Manager, this represented a 'big step' in their careers. Moving outside a store environment where action is often clearly defined through operating procedures and support is provided by a co-located team is identified as a challenge. The interview and selection process is also identified as in marked contrast to that adopted previously in their careers at Morrisons (far more formal and intensive).

In at the deep-end - To describe their experiences of progression at Morrisons, several research participants used the metaphor of 'being thrown in at the deep-end'. This appeared to become more marked as the individual progressed through the hierarchy and line managers and more senior managers 'stretched' and 'took individuals out of their comfort zones' through the provision of challenging and sometimes 'seemingly impossible' tasks. This was often identified (with hindsight at least) as making a positive contribution to their development. Respondents often continued the metaphor associated with promotion in terms of being left to 'sink or swim'. However the vast majority suggested that, despite their misgivings and the uncertainties surrounding a challenging new 'project' or position, they were able to cope and ultimately succeed often attributing this to the team around them.

Non-work factors - The majority of respondents made reference to the centrality of work to their lives. Several had struggled to maintain a satisfactory work-life balance at various points in their working lives and several research participants made reference to the role that supportive partners had played in their careers.

4.3. The psychological contract

A key issue associated with sustained employment is the degree to which the psychological contract between employer and employee is maintained.

Analysis of the life stories reveals several key factors associated with the psychological contract between the employer and the employee. The key elements emerging from the 'life stories' are illustrated in figure 4.

Figure 4: key elements of the psychological contract



Job opportunities and career pathways - The research participants generally report that Morrisons offers valued career pathways, job opportunities, personal development and career progression although until relatively recently, not necessarily in a structured or formal way. The research participants identify closely with the core values of Morrisons and often articulate a genuine affinity for the organisation and its position within the retail sector.

Job satisfaction and financial reward - The research participants all report enjoying their work (despite long hours which characterise work in the sector) and generally report being well rewarded as they have progressed. Financial reward is clearly an important aspect of the psychological contract however for many of the research participants the satisfaction of a 'job well done' and working for a company that shared their values appeared to be a source of immense satisfaction. In common with retail managers more generally, the vast majority are satisfied with various aspects of their current job (Broadbridge 2007).

Social Capital - The research participants suggest that they had developed positive relationships and social networks with many of their peers, subordinates and senior managers that were valued both in terms of the support they received at work, and more generally. Over time they built up significant social capital that contributed to feelings of satisfaction and achievement at work. From time-to-time, research participants may have considered moving to another organisation and a couple had left the organisation to return at a later date. However, all the research participants articulated a strong loyalty towards Morrisons and considerable pride in the company's achievements in becoming a successful major player in the retailing sector.

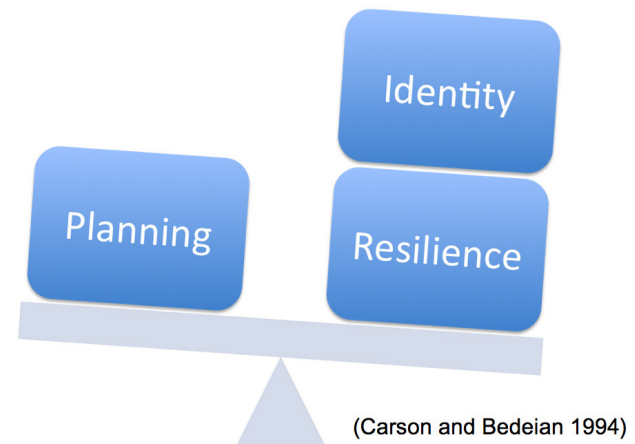
Physical mobility - Several research participants noted the importance of physical mobility, identified by others such as King et al (2005) as an important characteristic of career development and a means of updating and increasing the range of skills and knowledge acquired by individuals. The majority of research participants had demonstrated physical mobility albeit for some within a regional context.

Achievement - McClelland (1987) examines motivation in terms of the need for power, achievement and affiliation. No psychometric instruments were used and so this analysis is impressionistic based on the interviewers' personal observations as well as data in the transcripts. It seems clear that in the case of the research participants, achievement and affiliation is more significant than power. The participants talked about goal setting and exceeding targets and expectations as being important to them. Career goals are part of the equation but the major emphasis for most participants is performance in the job. Affiliation is also of some importance and this is evidenced by the references to supportive teams and the Morrison 'family'. However, the payoff for psychological as well as physical flexibility valued by most participants was successfully meeting new challenges, exceeding expectations and setting and achieving performance goals. These are all characteristics of individuals with high need for achievement.

5. Nature of Sustainable Progression at Morrisons

The traditional model of career development based on increasing status, responsibility and monetary rewards is evident through the 'life stories' of the Morrisons managers. The stories resonate with other research that suggests that the traditional career is still the preferred option for those who are seeking stability and structure (Guest and McKenzie-Davey 1996, Jacoby 1999, Ackah and Heaton 2004). In common with the findings of other studies, some individuals have remained fixed in a traditional career mindset which focuses on current roles and maintenance of existing skills, rather than preparing for an uncertain future through on-going self-assessment, environmental scanning and skills development (Clarke 2008). The life stories however also echo the characteristics of other careers. The wide-ranging contexts available for store managers to face new challenges and gain new skills through working in different types and size of store, new store openings and special projects are an example of this. The majority of research participants suggested that, in keeping with the incremental approach to career planning they adopted, they would be keen to progress to the 'next step'. Most often this was related to vertical progression however a couple expressed the wish to work in different divisions to broaden their experience. In terms of the three dimensions of career commitment identified by Carson and Bedeian (1994), the life stories suggest an emphasis on resilience and identity as opposed to planning, particularly in the early stages of working lives.

Figure 5: Dimensions of career commitment



The life stories lead us to conclude that resilience is a key characteristic of the research participants. There are numerous examples of a willingness and ability to continually learn and develop new skills and commitment to excellence in the workplace. The research participants recall actions that demonstrate tremendous commitment to the organisation and exhibit many of the characteristics often associated with 'employability': teamwork, effective communication, positive and flexible attitudes for example. Morrisons would appear to foster resilience through for example its use of coaching and the offer of development opportunities including the Management Development Programme and job rotation/progression. Research participants now demonstrate an awareness of opportunities that might prepare them for the future both in terms of potential positions that represent a step forward or promotion and the opportunities afforded through training and skills development (through for example the competency matrix and Management Development Programmes).

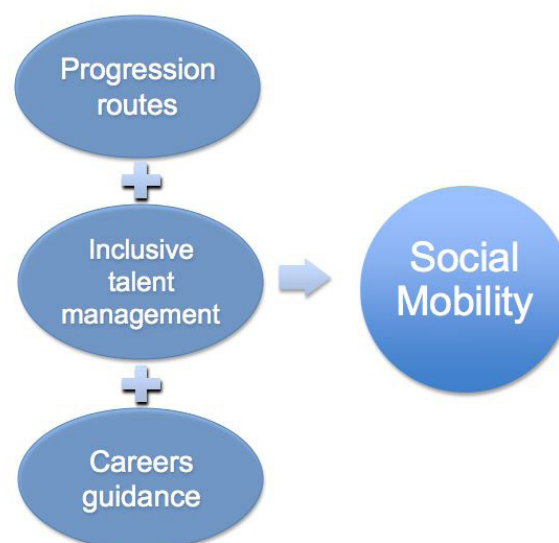
The identity and attachment to their career strengthens during their time at work. By the time they are store managers, the majority are aware of the opportunities to be pursued through for example new store openings, managing larger stores, 'special projects' or the development of cross-functional knowledge and skills. Most of them are aware of the next step they expect to take in their careers although their ultimate career goal is often not articulated. Other research participants however, suggested that they remained likely to 'see what came up', as opposed to targeting specific positions. The findings emerging from this study reinforce the view that as people's self-efficacy develops, their intention to exert control over career outcomes enables them to exhibit career self-management behaviours and those career behaviours can lead to the achievement of desired career goals and ultimately career success (King et al 2005). The research participants suggest that as colleagues, they soon set their sights on vertical promotion, achieving initial promotions to Supervisor and Departmental Head relatively rapidly. However, the majority of research participants have adopted a largely ad hoc and incremental approach to career management in contrast to the approach advocated in much of the recent literature (Clarke 2009).

6. Implications for Policy

There now appears to be widespread consensus that progression in the labour market is a key factor in addressing social mobility, with much of the research identifying barriers to progression for disadvantaged groups (Nunn et al 2007). There remains a need to recognise and understand the situated nature of the HRD policies and practices adopted by employers and the impact that these can have. The occupational structures and processes, which allow progression from entry-level roles to professional occupations, are a key to unlock the door to a range of opportunities for social mobility. The findings emerging from this research study suggest that employers like Morrisons are providing such structures and, for those research participants contributing to this research, an effective vehicle for progression. In this case sustainable progression appears to be built on largely informal processes aimed at developing self-efficacy and providing 'small steps' progression opportunities.

The recent development of an inclusive approach to talent management at Morrisons provides an opportunity for employees at all levels of the organisation to learn and progress. The Morrisons Food Academy provides a pathway for technicians and supports accredited learning up to NVQ level 2 for all staff, and the Management Development Programme (level 1 to 5) provides structured training to support the development of staff to progress to General Store Manager Level.

Figure 6: Key organisational factors unlocking the door to social mobility at Morrisons



For the research participants who all started out in 'working class' communities, employment at Morrisons has seen a real and substantial improvement in their financial and social situation. They have been able to start as colleagues on the shop floor and progress in the organisation in careers that (in several cases) span more than 20 years with Morrisons. The Morrisons approach to development has led to the broadening of the social networks of research participants and exposure to influential leaders and role models that have impacted positively on individuals in terms of for example self-confidence, esteem and work performance.

None of the research participants envisaged a career in retail on leaving school and several of them did not envisage a career in retail until they had been working in the sector for several years. The sector still suffers from an adverse image and there is an opportunity to improve the information available to those providing careers advice and guidance associated with the potential for job satisfaction and progression within the sector. Given the high labour turnover in the sector and the initial adverse reactions of some new recruits to working in the retail sector, employers and the public sector (through for example Jobcentre Plus or Skillsmart) may consider intervention to break the repeated cycle of short periods in work accompanied by periods of unemployment which bedevil some people facing multiple disadvantage in the labour market. The study also reveals an opportunity for organisations to raise the aspirations of their workforce through the encouragement of career planning and goal setting amongst employees as part of their own HRD processes.

A further policy implication emerging from the research relates to the use of qualifications as a proxy measure of skills growth in the UK. Morrisons is making a significant contribution to this agenda through its Academy and access to National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). However the managers contributing to this study are highly skilled and have almost exclusively developed to that level within Morrisons. They have not acquired higher-level qualifications that would reflect their current management and leadership skills levels and the vast majority of research participants express little or no wish to undertake the more formal, accredited learning that is the cornerstone of a 'demand-led' publicly-funded system. Morrisons is however currently reviewing the situation and considering accreditation of its Management Development Programme.

The research illustrates the potential of the retail sector for raising skills levels and providing an important contribution to developing human and social capital. It also provides employment opportunities for people from a variety of social backgrounds, often including local jobs for people living in disadvantaged communities. Current policy tends to focus on 'knowledge intensive' and 'high skill' industries. Retail is not commonly seen to fit within that category yet it is the UK's largest private sector employer and provides employment for just fewer than three million employees, contributing more than £321bn turnover to the national economy. The number of people employed in UK retail is forecast to increase by 6% between 2007 and 2017. This is equivalent to the creation of over 200,000 new jobs with a further 1.2 million job opportunities (due to replacement demand). As this case study demonstrates, employers like Morrisons have a key role to play in providing an important source of employment, progression routes and skills development opportunities and through this can act as a vehicle to facilitate greater social mobility.

7. Future Research

Early years experiences at home and in education are seen as a key to influencing later life chances and social mobility. This exploratory research tends to reinforce the importance of early family experiences and education factors in providing a sound foundation for the world of work. In terms of our research participants, those that had experienced a less supportive environment or had experienced adverse or shocking events in their formative years exhibited the personal or social resources to be able to deal with the situation. However for many of the most disadvantaged in society, this is not the case as they become increasingly marginalised from the labour market. In this case, the impact of employer progression routes is likely to be limited given the gap between employer expectations in the workplace and the employability of the individual. Exploration of the interface between for example third sector agencies dealing with those most at risk of exclusion and established employers such as Morrisons who provide employment and progression opportunities is one area worthy of further research and investigation.

This exploratory study suggests many possibilities for future research associated with the role that employers Human Resource Development policies and practices play in helping to establish progression routes and supporting processes that support social mobility. For example, the research has highlighted the 'push-pull' dimension of career development at Morrisons and the role that informal HRD processes play in the development of individuals. A study to investigate the factors which influence individuals generally, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds more specifically, to take ownership of their career would be a fruitful line of further enquiry.

This initial study has provided an insight into the individual and organisational factors which impact on the sustained progression of a small group of successful managers at Morrisons. A further quantitative study is planned to test the generalisability of the findings of this study and to develop further evidence of the contribution of the progression routes and processes offered by Morrisons to achieving a more socially mobile society.

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Methodological note

The study engaged eighteen managers in total in the research. Twelve of these came from 'working class' backgrounds and provide the foundation for the analysis contained in this report. The definition of working class is based on a combination of the nature of the occupations of their parents and the type of housing the research participants grew up in. Six of the original sample were removed from the analysis contained in this report however their life stories reflect and reinforce the findings associated with the factors influencing progression and the nature of sustainable progression at Morrisons.

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